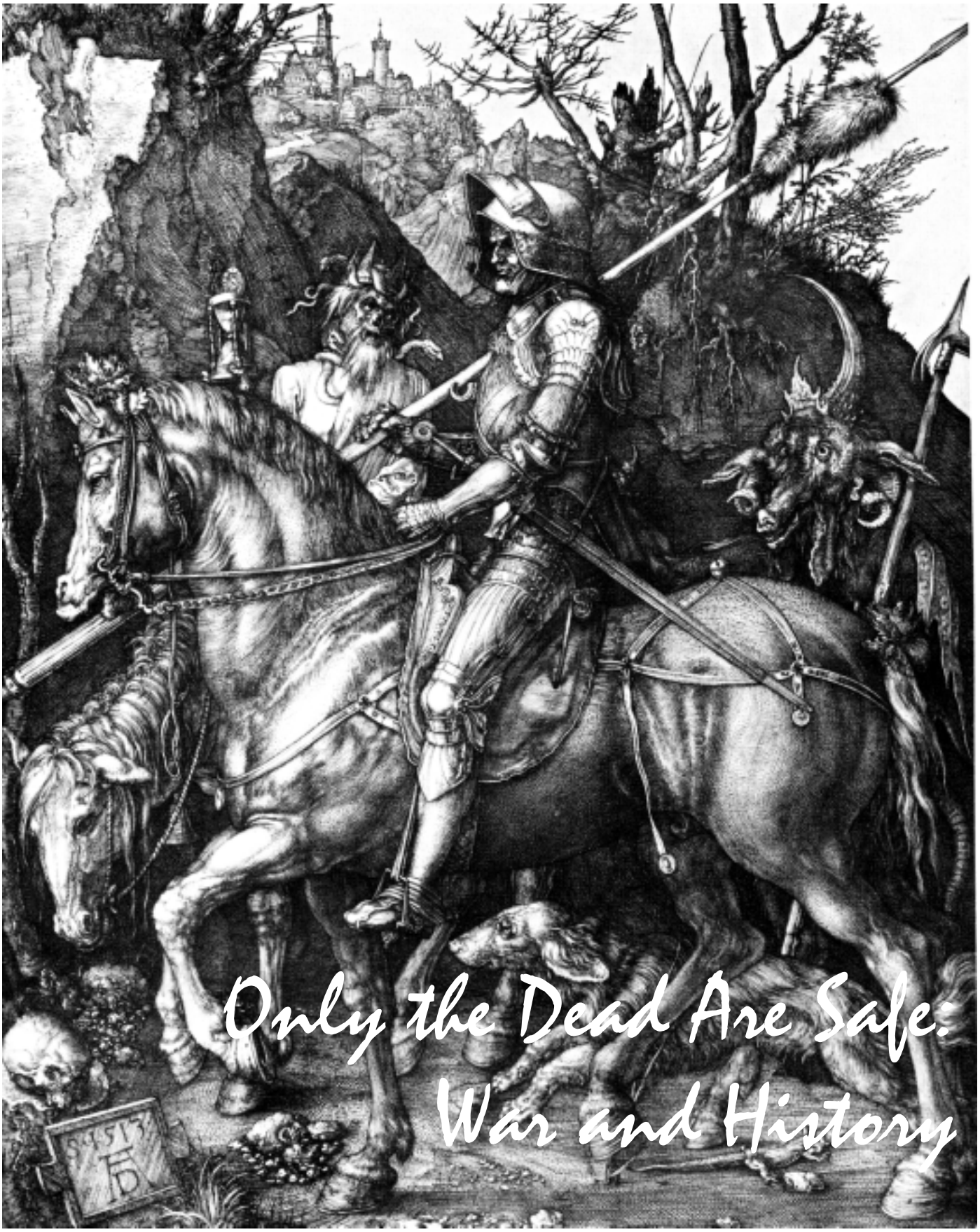
The Consolations of History


Only the Dead Are Safe:
War and History

When Tao does not prevail in the world, war horses thrive in the suburbs. —Lao Tzu

War has been with mankind since the beginning of time and it has exercised over man's mind an unshakable fascination and inspired a justifiable fear. It is the collective sin of the human species. For centuries it has ravaged, murdered, and destroyed the best of our culture. That it is a stalking evil needs no amount of argument. Thucydides summed it up best over 400 years before Christ's birth: "That war is an evil is something we all know, and it would be pointless to go on cataloging all the disadvantages involved in it. No one is forced into war by ignorance, nor, if he thinks he will gain from it, is he kept out o it by fear. The fact is that one side thinks that the profits to be won outweigh the risks to be incurred, and the other side is ready to face danger rather than accept an immediate loss." The British military historian, J. F. C. Fuller offered an updated paraphrase on the regularity of war some 2350 years later:

> Whether war is a necessary factor in the evolution of mankind may be disputed, but a fact which cannot be questioned is that, from the earliest records of man to the present age, war has been his dominant preoccupation. There has never been a period of human history altogether free from war, and seldom one of more than a generation which has not witnessed a major conflict: great wars flow and ebb almost as regularly as the tides.
>
> This becomes more noticeable when a civilization ages and begins to decay, as seemingly is happening to our world-wide industrial civilization. Whereas but a generation or two back war was accepted as an instrument of policy, it has now become policy itself. Today we live in a state of 'wardom'—a condition in which war dominates all other human activities. How long this tension will last, whether there is a definite answer to it, or whether it is destined blindly to work out its own end, no man can say; yet one thing is certain, and it is that the more we study the history of war, the more we shall be able to understand war itself, and, seeing that it is now the dominant factor, until we do understand it, how can we hope to regulate human affairs?"

Greek Warrior from Temple at Aegina
Munich Glyptothek

Thomas Hobbes voiced his pessimistic outlook in the 17th century when he postulated that self-interest is the underlying condition of human existence and that the history of mankind is one of every man against every man. Laws are needed to regulate human waywardness and treaties to mollify national ambitions. It was in this context that Hobbes issued his famous warning, "covenants without swords are but words."

If war is admittedly man's ultimate damnation, then are not soldiers, in the words of Wilfred Owen "…dullards whom no cannon stuns,/Immune to pity and whatever moans in man…?" Are their leaders like the majors in Siegfried Sassoon's poem "fierce and bald, and short of breath" who "speed

glum heroes up the line to death."? Are military historians simply raking through the ashes and disturbing the boneyard of war? Are military museum curators stackers of the detritus of vainglorious careers? The answers lie in the contradictoriness of the human condition.

War is woven into the fabric of our cultural existence. In Rome, Trajan's column, first erected in 113 a.d., stands a monument to the towering achievements of Roman feats of arms; some 2,500 legionaires animate its upwardly spiraling frieze for over 656 feet. In Bayeux, through its 12th century tapestries, the story of the Norman invasion of England and the victgory at Hastings of William the Conqueror is embroidered upon the consciousness of succeeding generations. A late thirteenth century scroll now in Tokyo celebrates the exploits of the knight Takezaki whose armor makes him impervious to Mongol arrows and bombs.

In Paris, Theodore Gericault romanticizes the blaze of uniform, the nobility of the horseman, in his painting of the *Cavalry Officer of the Imperial Guard Charging, 1812*. In London, Clarkson Stanfield recreated *The Battle of Trafalgar*, his canvas awash with the dramatic chiaroscuro of naval warfare.

War and heroism have inspire song from the *Iliad* of 700 b.c. to Jim Morrison's 1968 recording of *The Unknown Soldier*. The spectacle of the Bronze Age Trojan Wars is conveyed vividly by the drum-like vibrations of Homer's hexameters in the western world's oldest complete books. Hosts of Chinese footmen and chariots sweep into the Valley of the Huai in the sixth century B.C. *Book of Songs*. Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony is a mighty paean to the heroic in man and was originally dedicated to Napoleon Bonaparte.

If evil, then why have historians and poets through the centuries sung the praises of "pride, pomp, and the circumstances of glorious war?" There has been an idea of just war at least since St. Augustine, one in which a nation of men fight for what they believe to be true and right against wrong doers. So it is to the justice of their cause and their final victory that monuments are erected and to which are is dedicated. Just war is a concept, however, which can be criticized as belonging only to the victors.

Another explanation is more psychological. It says the idealization of the hero and sanctification of the sacrifice of life in battle is a kind of transformation of the intrinsic evil and savagery of war into a more tolerable exultation of the human spirit.

Alfred Lord Tennyson recognized this contradiction in the human spirit when he wrote *The Charge of the Heavy Brigade at Balaclava*. In the poem an interlocutor questions the commemoration of war by the poet. She says: "You praise when you should blame/The barbarism of wars."

Tennyson answers: "I would that wars should cease,/I would the globe from end to end/Might sow and reap in peace, /And who loves war for war's won sake/Is fool, or crazed, or worse,/But let the patriot-soldier take/His meed of fame in verse;/Nay-tho' that realm were in the wrong/For which her warriors bleed,/It still were right to crown with son/The warrior's noble deed."

The distinction was not lost on the editor of the U.S. Army's World War II series who used for the dedication in each of the volumes part of the quotation: "We honor not war, but those who served in

defense of their country, home and people."

To get at the truth, it will be necessary to make a distinction between the institution of war, with all of its accompanying horrors, and human conduct in war. It is to the latter that poets and artists have directed their attention. When they address war itself, it is with abhorence as in the cases of Goya's *The Horrors of War*, Picasso's *Guernica*, and the poetry of Winifred Owen and E. E. Cummings. No one can deny the admirability of human traits such as courage and sacrifice under circumstances that, while intrinsically evil, have no moral bearing on the acts of heroism and nobility which they occasion. No one expresses the soldier's commitment more eloquently than philosopher George Santanya. "If you think happiness worth enjoying, think it worth defending. Nothing you can lose by dying is half so precious as the readiness to die, which is man's charter of nobility; life would not be worth having without the freedom of the soul and the friendship with nature which that readiness brings."

The influence of war on history is summed up by Cyril Falls: "…all men, common and uncommon, great and small…have been profoundly and unceasingly influenced by war. Our literature, our art and our architecture are stamped with the vestiges of war. Our very language has a thousand bellicose words and phrases woven into its fabric. And our material destinies, our social life and habits, our industry and trade, have assumed their present forms and characteristics largely as the result of war. …We are all of us, indeed, the heirs of many wars."

Recorded history shows that since 7,000 B.C. there have only been 250 years that have been without war on the planet Earth. Peace and Tao have prevailed only two percent of the time. This experience has caused the conservative or realist theory on the cause of war to be formulated. It holds that men are basically animal-like and aggressive in behavior and that war is inevitable. French philosopher Jules Michelet could be said to be an exponent of this theory. He says, "With the world began a war which will end only with the world: the war of man against nature, of spirit against matter, of liberty against fatality. History is nothing other than the record of this interminable struggle." After World War I, the war to end all wars, George Santanya wrote, "Only the dead are safe; only the dead have seen the end of war."

The counter theory contends that war is an evil that can be replaced by peace if only man will override his aggressive instinct with reason, show goodwill, and undertake the improvement of those social conditions which lead to war. This is called the liberal or idealist theory. A spokesman for this view is Immanuel Kant who writes, "By the expenditure of all the resources of the commonwealth in military preparations against each other, by the devastations occasioned by war, and still more by the necessity of holding themselves continually in readiness for it, the full development of the capacities of mankind are undoubtedly retarded in their progress; but, on the other hand, the very evils which thus arrive, compel men to find out means against them. A law of equilibrium is thus discovered for the regulation of the really wholesome antagonisms of contiguous states as it springs up out of their freedom; and a united power,

giving emphasis to this law, is consitituted, whereby there is introduced a universal condition of public security among the nations."

Philosopher William James, in his essay "The Moral Equivalent of War" written in 1910, admits that "our ancestors have bred pugnacity into our bone and marrow, and thousands of years of peace won't breed it out of us." He quoted Thucydides on the Athenians who said, "The powerful exact what they can, and the weak grant what they must."

James reiterates the idea of a just war. He says, "Only when forced upon one, only when an enemy's injustice leaves us no alternative, is a war now thought permissible."

Describing the position of those who hold war to be an absolute good, James says:

> Modern war is so expensive that we feel trade to be a better avenue to plunder; but modern man inherits all the innate pugnacity and all the love of glory of his ancestors. Showing war's irrationality and horror is of no effect upon him. The horrors make the fascination. War is the *strong* life; it is life *in extremis*; war-taxes are the only ones men never hesitate to pay, as the budgets of all nations show us. …it is human nature at its highest dynamic. Its "horrors" are a cheap price to pay for rescue from the only alternative supposed, of a world of clerks and teachers….
>
> …Militarism is the great preserver of our ideals of hardihood, and human life with no use for hardihood would be contemptible. Without risks or prizes for the darer, history would be insipid indeed; and there is a type of military character which every one feels that the race should never cease to breed, for every one is sensitive to its superiority. …War is, in short, a permanent human *obligation*.

For James' part, he prefers the more utopian view. "I devoutly believe," he writes,

> in the reign of peace and in the gradual advent of some sort of a socialistic equilibrium. The fatalistic view of the war-function is to me nonsense, for I know that war-making is due to definite motives and subject to prudential checks and reasonable criticisms, just like any other form of enterprise. And when whole nations are the armies, and the science of destruction vies in intellectual refinement with the sciences of production, I see that war becomes absurd and impossible from its own monstrosity. Extravagant ambitions will have to be replaced by reasonable claims, and nations must make common cause against them. …I look forward to a future when acts of war shall be formally outlawed as between civilized peoples."

Against this backdrop of militarism vs. pacificism, James proposes a substitute for the dynamism of war. He suggests a *moral equivalent* of war that would channel aggresive tendencies, intrepidity, and the need to serve one's country into peaceful, constructive pursuits.

Quincy Wright's *A Study of*

War, first published in 1942, is still one of the most comprehensive, scholarly appraisals of the political causes of war. In his two-volume work, Wright notes that war and its causes is viewed from different perspectives by the scientist, historian and publicist.

The scientist, Wright postulates, looks at the causes of war as arising out of the conditions that allowed states to make faulty judgments and decisions. They find war precipated by

> "(1) …the difficulty of maintaining stable equilibrium among the uncertain and fluctating political and military forces within the state system [balance of power]; (2)…the difficulty of utilizing the sources and sanctions of international law so as to make it an effective instrument for determining the changing interests of states, the changing values of humanity, and the just settlement of international disputes; (3)…the difficulty of so organizing political power that it can maintain order in a universal society, not threatened by other societies external to itself; and (4)…the difficulty of making peace a more important symbol in world public opinion than particular short, scientific investigators, giving due consideration to both the historic inertia and the inventive genius of mankind, have tended to attribute war to immaturities in social knowledge and control, as might attribute epidemics to insufficient medical knowledge or to inadequate public health services. The basic cause of war, in their opinion, is the failure of mankind to establish conditions of peace. War, they think, is inevitable in a jungle world; peace is an artificial construction.

Historians by training are inclined to separate the occasion of war from its causes. They look to explain it through a process of change which has its roots in the past. They look for causes in antecedents, those "events, circumstances, and conditions which can be related to the war by practical, political, and juristic commonplaces about human motives, impulses, and intentions."

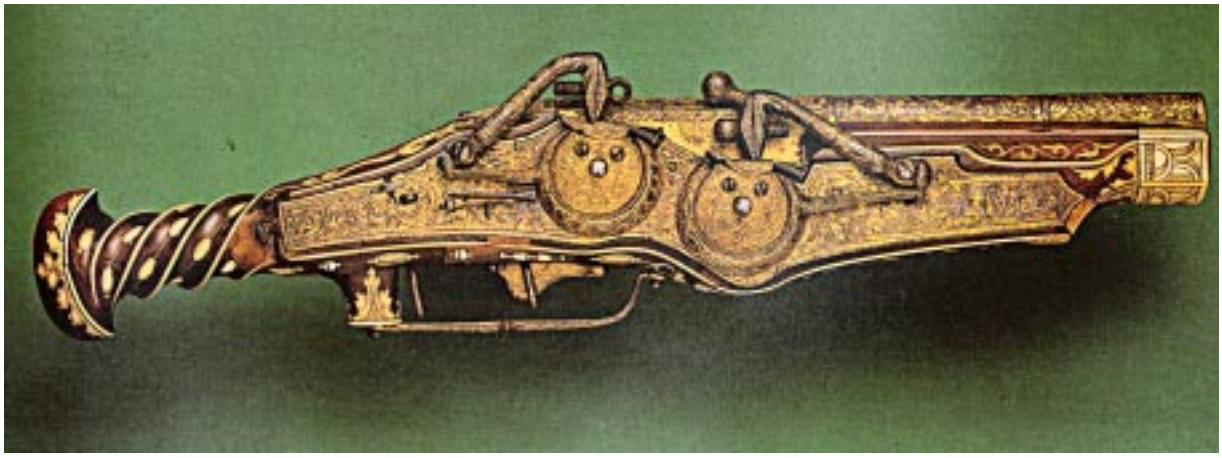
Publicists and politicians also look to will and motives for their explanations of wars. Wars will arise when:

> (1) Men and governments find themselves in situations where they believe they must fight or cease to exist, and so they fight from necessity. (2) Men or governments want something—wealth, power, social solidarity—and, if the device of war is known to them and other means have failed, they use war as a rational means to get what they want. (3) Men and governments have a custom of fighting for an ideology which requires fighting in the presence of certain stimuli, and so in appropriate situations they fight. (4) Men and governments feel like fighting because they are pugnacious, bored, or the victims of frustrations or complexes, and accordingly they fight spontaneously for relief or relaxation.

For Wright, the way to organize peace is through international

planning and organization. The United Nations should serve as a world executive body and as a world court in the event of disputes. World citizenship and world responsiblities should replace the self-interest of individual states so that collective action could enforce the findings of the UN Security Council.

It becomes apparent that a knowledge of past warring is imperative. If war is inevitable, they military history is a basic survival course. If war can be made obsolete, then it will be necessary to learn as much as possible about the causes of war and its destructive power in order to bring about that end. This is especially true for the military man who has the most to lose in a war and the least to gain. Armies and navies are the largest, best organized, anti-war groups in the world. In the words of Sir Charles Oman, "…one may dislike war just as one dislikes disease; but to decry the necessity for studying it…is no less absurd than it would be to minimize the need for medical investigation because one disliked cancer or tuberculosis."



The fact of war intensifies man's yearning for peace but does not delude him that it can be had without mutual trust or preparedness. Only by accepting the fact of war and knowing it can man steadfastly avoid it and turn the galloping war horses back into the pastures to fertilize them.

Sources:

Falls, Cyril, *The Place of War in History*, Oxford Univ Press, London, 1947, p.7.
James, William, "The Moral Equivalent of War," 1908.
Michelet, Jules, quoted in Wilson, Edmund, *To Finland Station,* Doubleday & Company, Garden City, New York, 1940.
Nelson, Keith L. and Olin, Soencer C., Jr., *Why War? Ideology, Theory and History*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1979.
Oman, Sir Charles, *Studies in the Napoleonic Wars*, Meuthen, London, 1930, p.24.
Santayana, George, *The Life of Reason*, Scribners, New York, 1953.
Thucydides, quoted in Cohen, J.M. and M.J., *Penguin Book of Quotations*, Penguin Books, New York, 1971.
Wright, Quincy, *A Study of War*, 2d abridged edition, Univeristy of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1942, 1964, 1983.